

Keep This One by rosekings

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Summary:

"You're looking fancy."

"Don't mention it. Is Eleven here?" Nancy crosses her arms in the threshold of Hopper's cabin. Hopper nods but doesn't move from the doorway.

"Why?" he asks, extremely uninterested.

Nancy almost laughs. "It's the night of the Snow Ball and Eleven needs someone to help her get ready. You're not going to do it, are you?"

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Author's Note:

I know everyone headcanons the way that Eleven gets ready for the Snow Ball differently, and this is just my version! Originally posted on my [Tumblr](#).

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Hopper pauses for a moment and then nods his head. “Yeah, alright.” He steps aside, sitting back down at the kitchen table. “El!”

Nancy edges inside, glancing around. The place has definitely been cleaned up. The last time she was here, the windows were shattered, there was a boy tied to a bed with a monster in him, a sweltering heat was suffocating them all, and she had a fiery red poker in her hand. It’s the source of her nightmares, each one altered every time, but strangely, she’s not terrified of coming back in. She’s just tired.

Eleven opens her door. She smiles at Nancy, brown curls wild and unruly. “Hi, Nancy.”

“Hey. I thought you might need some help getting ready for tonight.” Nancy closes the front door and slides off her backpack as she moves across the room. She unzips it to show Eleven an assortment of makeup and hair products and, at the bottom, a dress and a pair of shoes. Eleven looks at her, confused.

“I can’t wear this?” she asks, gesturing to her (frankly adorable, Nancy thinks) overalls and flannel.

"It's more of a - a nice event. You know, where you can dress up special." Nancy waggles an eyebrow at her. "This is one of my dresses, just like the pretty pink one you used to wear."

Eleven nods and allows Nancy into her room, shutting the door behind her. El sits down on the edge of the bed, twisting her fingers. Nancy awkwardly climbs on the bed behind her, pins up a portion of the girl's curly locks, and starts to work.

Nancy isn't really sure why she wanted to do this. Maybe she's hoping to bond with the girl that her brother is so crazy about, or maybe it's a mental thing. There's too many emotions mixed up for her to tell anymore. Guilt for cheating on Steve before they officially broke up (which they still haven't done), confusion about what the hell is going on with her and Jonathan, the pain and loneliness of losing Barbara, the isolation she feels from the rest of her school peers...she's barely holding herself together.

"Are you...okay?"

Nancy stares at the back of Eleven's head where she's slowly spraying, pinning, up-doing. "Yeah, I'm fine."

El minutely shakes her head. "Everyone says 'fine' but - they don't mean it."

Nancy lets out a breathy laugh. "You're right," she says, nodding. "It's bullshit." She slides a bobby pin through a lock of soft brown hair. "I've just got a lot going on. We all do."

"Jonathan?" Eleven asks.

"Him, his brother, Mike, my parents, Steve..." She trails off. Her thoughts are completely scattered and she tries to focus on the hairdo in front of her. Eleven stays silent and finally the hair is finished. Nancy clambers off the bed and drags a chair around to face El. Pulling out her various makeups, she tries to avoid looking Eleven in the eye (how on earth does she see through Nancy so easily?), but it's a difficult task.

"Nancy."

“Yeah?”

“You’re not okay.”

Nancy’s hands drop, the eyeshadow palette held loosely in her fingers. She finally meets El’s eyes. A lump forms in her throat, composed of exhaustion and tears. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

Nancy takes a deep breath and delicately applies the rest of the eyeshadow, choosing her words just as carefully. “For everything you’ve done for us, El. Trying to save Barb. Saving Will. Killing the Demogorgons. Closing the gate. Coming back in general. No one should ever go through what you did.”

“I had to.” Eleven swallows as Nancy puts some blush on her cheeks with slightly shaky hands. “I had to,” she repeats more firmly.

Nancy nods. “Mike was - he was a wreck, without you,” she says with a half-hearted laugh. “It was the worst year of his life.” She pauses, pulling the lipstick out of her bag. “It was the worst year of everyone’s life, now that I think about it. And, trust me, I try not to think about it.”

“I wish things would be...” El breaks off, at a loss for the right word.

“Normal?” Nancy suggests.

“Happier. Not halfway happy. All the way happy. I wish you would be all the way happy.”

Nancy sighs, dropping the last of the makeup in her backpack. “Me too, El.” She sits back, admiring her work. Eleven reaches out and gently swipes a tear off Nancy’s cheek. Nancy hadn’t realized it was there.

“Okay?” she asks in her plaintive voice.

Nancy just swallows the lump in her throat, gives El a smile, and gets to her feet. “Let’s get you dressed, huh?”

She hands Eleven her blue-and-pink dress and waits as she goes to the bathroom to change. Nancy leans back in her chair, head tipped skyward. How can this thirteen-year-old girl read her so effortlessly? *It's the superpowers*, she thinks. *Not because I'm an open book. At all.* Who the hell is she kidding? Her feelings are as readable as a billboard, especially when she's mad. She almost runs her hands through her hair before remembering it's in an extremely stiff and stylized up-do and lets them fall to her thighs in frustration. She's got a billion bottled-up emotions and an urge to kick something and all anyone wants to do is just *forget*. How can she forget? How can *anyone*?

She's *trying* to pretend things are normal. She's *trying* to be happy and composed and act like she's got her shit together but she *doesn't*. That's the entire problem and it's tearing her apart. She refuses to talk to Jonathan about it because of what he's going through with helping Will recuperate. Mike is too busy hanging out with his friends to hold a conversation with her, and her parents definitely aren't an option. Steve...maybe, but the issues between the two of them have to be resolved before anything else, and she's not up for doing that right now.

She's seriously considering acting on her impulse to break the vase holding a bouquet from her brother just to make her feel better when Eleven walks back into the room. She looks absolutely *adorable*, with her pink eyeshadow and blue dress and the innocent wide-eyed look she's got. It's quite a contrast to the punk-runaway look she showed up with a month ago.

"Bitchin' or pretty?" she asks, totally straight-faced. Nancy bursts out laughing, doubling over in her chair. When she looks up, tears filling her eyes and ribs hurting, Eleven's got confusion painted all across her face. The sludge of emotions in Nancy's stomach eases up a bit and she realizes it feels good to genuinely laugh again.

"Pretty. Definitely pretty," she says once she's recovered herself. She zips up her backpack and hands a pair of flats to El, walking out of the room. Hopper raises his eyes from his newspaper and grins when he sees his adopted daughter.

"That's new," he says.

“Pretty?” she asks, spinning once. *She picked that up on TV*, Nancy thinks, smiling to herself.

“Oh, yeah, definitely. Mike’s gonna love it.”

Eleven blushes and Nancy swings her backpack onto her shoulder. “My work here is done. You look fabulous, El. See you tonight.”

“Thank you, Nancy.”

They step out into the freezing cold and Nancy’s kind of regretting wearing her dress and heels two hours before the dance. She’s about to begin the trek back to her car when Eleven grabs her wrist.

“All the way happy, okay? Promise?”

Nancy smiles and gives the girl a kiss on the forehead. “Promise.”

The past two years have been filled with a lot of promises Nancy made but couldn’t keep. This time, though, she really, truly wants to keep this one.